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Cultivating Natures: Homes and Gardens in Late Modernity

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ABSTRACT In this paper we seek to engage with contemporary environmental debates concerning human–nature relations at the everyday level. Our focus is on the domestic or home garden, which we argue is a significant locale for understanding human–nature relations. Secondary empirical data illustrate the growth of gardening and its connections to changes in housing tenure, consumption patterns and the 'commodification of nature' by the garden industry. Primary empirical data on the meanings of home and garden (and gardening activities) are utilised to understand the relations between human agency and contemporary human–nature relations. The findings suggest that a variety of social and economic processes encourage utilitarian and consumerist orderings of nature in gardens. But the meanings of gardens are also structured by personal practices, often reflecting relationships with family and friends, that produce complex and personalised connections with nature that illustrate the ambiguity of human–nature relations.

KEYWORDS garden, home, human agency, leisure, nature, space

Nature and everyday spaces

In his book *Flora Britannica*, Richard Mabey argues that 'our vernacular relationships with nature should be taken every bit as seriously as the folklore of less developed areas' (Mabey 1996:12). His large-scale study of popular understandings of plants and ecological systems shows that, while many of the older superstitions about the natural world are fading, 'the ancient engagements between plants, people and places continue unabated'. Moreover, it is claimed that there is more biodiversity in the average suburban garden than in many areas in the countryside, especially where industrial farming has resulted in mono-agriculture (Gilbert 1992). Within the context of the debate about the role of social sciences in environmental futures (see Newby 1991; Shove 1994), the garden, and gardening practices may be important not just in maintaining local biodiversity, which is dependent upon local ecological knowledge, but as a key locale within which nature and wider environmental issues are debated and understood (see Bhatti 1999). This paper is a belated response to Howard Newby's (1991) challenge to social scientists to address the new

environmental agenda, and in particular to apply the 'sociological imagination' to changing human–nature relations. By the end of the 1990s there had been increased effort to engage directly with environmental issues. Indeed, the sociological dimension of environmental change and action is being actively researched and critically debated (see Macnaghton and Urry, 1995, 1998; Burningham and Cooper 1999; Soper 1995; Dickens 1992, 1996) and increasingly linked to the long-standing concern of geography with human–nature relations (Braun and Castree 1998).

In this paper we seek to link the broad and often abstract geographical and sociological debate about cultures of nature to the everyday world of homes and gardens. To some degree research into nature, everyday social worlds and micro-geographies has become implicitly associated with social constructionist perspectives which focus on how nature should be understood. Macnaghton and Urry (1998:2) argue that the social practices which construct and transform natures and environmental values have a number of 'constitutive principles' so that they are 'discursively ordered ... embodied ... spaced ... timed and involve models of human activity, risk, agency and trust'. Understanding these social practices requires an analysis of how people 'work' at their responses and everyday practices especially in their dwelt-in worlds. The 'dwelling perspective' draws on the work of Ingold (1993) and concentrates on the landscape as 'lived-in' dwelling.

Home gardens may appear to be of limited value for abstract debates about human–nature relations, but we want to argue that everyday spaces act as important sites for lay knowledges of, and connections to, nature. In response to the broader theoretical discussions on the re-envisioning of nature, the research was designed on the principle that nature is imbued with a certain agency and that human relations with nature are fashioned by everyday routines, which can be usefully compared to the ideologies and commodifications of nature that stem from the practice of capitalism. The paper, therefore, is perhaps an example of the weak social constructionist approach identified by Dickens (1996), as applied to home gardens.

The empirical research is based on our own survey and data from the Mass Observation Project (Sheridan 1993); it considers the contemporary role of domestic gardens in England and their implications for human–nature relations. We are not directly engaging in the wider debate about 'What is nature?' (see Dickens 1996; Soper 1995; Williams 1980), rather we are limiting our focus to human–nature relations and the practices of cultivation and interaction with flora and fauna within the specific locale of the garden. So we examine not only the use and meaning of the garden but also the social significance of the act of cultivation, that is, gardening. We are seeking to use gardens as an everyday site for considering how human agency through routine practices connects with the sensory presence of nature, whether ontologically distinct or not, and how these connections are structured through broader economic, social and cultural processes. Furthermore, we acknowledge the important component of structuration theory that human agency is fashioned not

only by structure and mediating modalities but also by the system of interaction between individuals and social groups (Giddens 1984). Thus, the empirical analysis seeks to reveal how the process of real and imagined communication and social interaction with family, friends and other individual agents mediates the use and meaning of gardens. In this way we seek to ground some of the more abstract theoretical debates on human–nature relations in a wide-ranging study of a particular domestic space. Thus, gardens are locales – sites where human agency and social relations can have a considerable influence on the use and meaning of space which may have implications for how nature is known and interpreted.

The analysis recognises, however, that gardens are sites of cultural consumption (Chevalier 1998), shaped by changing consumerism and the production priorities of the garden industry in the form of garden centres and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) retailers who sell garden products. Also there are distinct class dimensions to gardening and the meaning of gardens (Gold 1984; Groening and Schneider 1999; Olechnowicz 1997; Morris 1994; Bhatti 1999). For example, Constantine (1981) has argued that late nineteenth century garden shows and competitions were traditionally arranged to confirm working-class forms of behaviour preferred by the middle-class organisers. Class-based interpretations of contemporary gardening practices and meanings are not the key focus of this paper. Gardening highlights complex relations between leisure attitudes and age, gender, income and time availability, which cannot be simplistically linked to crude class differences in garden forms and designs. Also, the uses and meanings of gardens will, to some degree, reflect differences in cultural and national identities. The teahouse chaniwa in Japan and the status-symbol roof terraces in world cities are examples of how the garden has a variety of meanings in different contemporary societies. Exploring the complex connections between gardens and social relations in terms of class, race, national identity and gender would be over-ambitious in a single academic paper that is also seeking to present detailed empirical analysis. Elsewhere we have started to examine how social relations structure the meanings of contemporary gardens (Bhatti and Church 2001), and how gender relations affect personal home-making practices and leisure routines in the garden (Bhatti and Church 2000). In this paper we aim to deepen the understanding of contemporary human–nature relations in everyday life by initially considering how capitalist production and consumption provides an influential context to human agency in the garden. We then analyse how this broader context interacts with the regularised practices in the garden and assess the implications for human–nature relations in contemporary society.

The paper is in three main sections: the first briefly outlines the meanings of home and emphasises the significance of the garden in the debate about cultures of nature. The second section utilises secondary empirical data to examine the changing use of the garden and the nature of the garden industry in order to identify the broad economic and social processes that fashion human agency in the garden.

The third section sets out the methods used for primary data collection and uses this primary data to examine practices and meanings in gardens and their significance for the understanding of human–nature relations. In conclusion we argue that the garden is a major site for understanding certain contemporary social and environmental issues, but one that has so far been neglected in social science.

Homes, nature and the garden

Previous empirical analyses of nature and everyday life have often been concerned with non-domestic, 'local' spaces. For example, public parks (Burgess, Limb and Harrison 1988; Hoyles 1994), allotments (Crouch and Ward 1988), regional landscapes (Macnaghton and Urry 1998) and golf courses (Wilson 1992) have all provided valuable everyday worlds and spaces for exploring human–nature relations in modern and late modern societies. Domestic gardens also contain a tangible and visible non-human nature but are markedly different to these other 'local', non-domestic spaces partly because of their increasing ubiquity, legislative forms of ownership and the real and imagined connections to the home. Contemporary considerations of the meanings of gardens have often stressed their links to the social construction of the home. For example, Francis and Hestor (1990) suggest the garden, like the home, is a semi-private place, a haven from the public world of work and a source of security. Similarly, Tuan (1990) identifies the role of gardens in the construction of a domestic 'sense of place'.

More common, however, are discussions of domestic gardens that seek to identify their connections to wider social and political processes. A number of studies have analysed historical representations and practices associated with gardens to explore human and landscape/nature interactions (Gold 1984; Daniels 1999). Morris (1996) uses the spaces of the garden to explore the relations between gender, class and Englishness in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The extensive literature on garden history often deconstructs the social and political characteristics of both vernacular gardens and those developed by wealthy elites (Constantine 1981; Daniels 1999). One neglected area has been the role of the home garden in lay understandings of nature. Groening and Schneider (1999), using mainly historical examples, outline how lay gardening projects are intellectually and practically constructed in a very different manner to professionally designed gardens. Moreover, Sime has suggested, 'The home garden as a significant part of the home and a physical locale for home-making and dwelling has been neglected' (1993:240). It is important, however, not to equate the garden with the home in a simplistic manner not least because from a leisure perspective there are multiple and gendered meanings associated with home (Allan and Crow 1991; Bhatti and Church 2000).

The meanings of home has received considerable discussion from a number of

perspectives (see Saunders 1990; Allan and Crow 1989; Chapman and Hocky 1999; Gregson and Lowe 1995; Madigan and Munro 1993; Wardhaugh 1999). Rarely has the garden been incorporated into these debates (but see Kaplan and Kaplan 1990 for a psychological view). For example, in Domosh's (1998) review of geographical studies of the home there is no mention of gardens and yet gardens often figure quite highly when people discuss their homes. In an attempt to summarise some of the different theoretical perspectives on the home Wardhaugh (1999:96) argues that discussions concentrating on 'the home as source of order and identity' tend to neglect the wider social role of the home in excluding individuals in space and from dominant codes and meanings. Thus, home, whilst a physical space, is also 'a state of being' and is not a static entity with clear boundaries but involves dynamic interconnections between inside and outside and private and public. Putnam similarly stresses the elusiveness of home as a concept and claims that recent social changes that have led to a less clearly specified domestic gender and functional roles in the home. He argues that 'the "home" as an ideological category may come to have a less definite and fully specified signification' (Putnam 1993:152).

Home-making is an active and dynamic process in which gender and age relations are embedded. It is also based on a range of regularised social practices that enhance personal and group identities and contribute to the social and spatial orderings that structure the key meanings of home in relation to privacy, security, family/kinship, leisure, house space/design, and ownership. It is these different meanings that inform certain sections of our empirical discussion of human agency and the garden. In addition, our view of home-making accepts that the home and consequently the garden should be treated as fluid in terms of its meanings and boundaries and offering multiple social possibilities (Massey 1994; Hinchcliffe 1997). Such an approach allows for the garden to have a distinctive role in home-making.

The implications of contemporary home-making for human–nature relations have been considered by a number of commentators. Law (1994) argues that home-making based on privatisation and the search for security would result in practices and meanings that maintain existing ecological spaces and thus a culture of nature that is essentially utilitarian with nature perceived as external and distant. Similarly, Hinchcliffe (1997) argues that contemporary home-making prioritises a secure 'ideal' home, which distances the individual from environmental problems. The 'ideal', however, may differ from the 'lived' home and cannot obscure growing environmental uncertainty and the ecological consequences and ambiguities of individual actions. In this context, the garden as a micro-social space takes on a particular importance since it represents literally 'nature' in the home, but it will also reflect the ambiguities of the ecological dimensions of home-making.

For Francis and Hestor (1990:2) the 'idea' of the garden has changed over time, but is nearly always linked to our relationship with nature: 'The garden has long served as a way of thinking about nature and about culture and how each influences

the other ... as the balancing point between human control on the one hand and wild nature on the other'. Indeed, the garden is most often seen as 'nature-under-control' despite the differing traditions in English gardening typified by the contrast between Victorian formal gardens and vernacular cottage gardens (Hoyles 1991). The garden is ordered, with everything neatly in its place, a display of what nature should be and what it should look like. In the United States, Wilson (1992) suggests the ordered, post-war, domestic garden contributed to a modernist culture of nature. These differing approaches to understanding gardens often interpret them as reflections of broader social and cultural processes. Human agency is most likely to be considered through the influence of key garden designers such as Jekyll, Walpole or Repton (see, for example, Daniels 1999). The result is that everyday practices and routines in the domestic garden and their implications for the articulation of nature are far less well understood. Yet in the garden individuals face considerable ecological dilemmas, ambiguities and opportunities in terms of how they engage with plants, insects and animals, that is, a particular form of nature. Equally, the social conditions and norms which fashion domestic gardens may be rather different to the power and social structures shaping human–nature interactions in non-domestic situations such as urban parks or regional landscapes.

In short, we use our empirical analysis to argue that alongside utilitarian views of nature in domestic gardens promoted by capitalist priorities and consumerism there are alternative meanings based on highly personalised (re)connections to nature. We suggest that on the one hand the privatism and retreat central to the process of home-making combine with the strategies of the garden industry to produce individualised, primarily utilitarian practices in gardens. On the other hand, our empirical evidence indicates that alternative meanings attached to gardens are closely linked to the relational processes and social interaction involved in the garden and home-making. Individuals seeking a 'deeper' connection to nature in their gardens draw on real and imagined relations with family, friends and neighbours to imbue their garden with a range of meanings and possibilities. As part of this analysis we do not seek to define nature in theoretical terms or discuss the different natures that are addressed in the process of home-making. Instead, we use empirical research to examine how lay interpretations of nature and environmental issues coalesce around particular spatial uses and meanings of gardens. The next section uses secondary empirical data to examine the contemporary social and economic contexts that influence individual practices and agency in the garden.

Gardens, consumption, and the garden industry

Compared to other European nations Britain has a relatively high proportion of dwellings with private gardens (Evenson 1979). In the United Kingdom in 1996 there were 20.2 million private gardens and a MINTEL survey of 953 adults found

that nearly 84 per cent had access to a garden and 4 per cent to a communal garden (MINTEL 1999). In a very small number of cases access may not allow regular use due to constraints imposed by the owner but the survey suggested the vast majority of respondents had unhindered access. The MINTEL survey is one of a number of recently collected secondary datasets that highlight significant trends in garden forms and approaches to gardening. These data are based on large sample surveys and are better used to examine general trends rather than behaviour and complex personal attitudes. Nevertheless, they indicate some of the wider economic and social processes structuring the use and meaning of gardens.

The marked increase in owner occupation in Britain over the last three decades, whereby 68 per cent of households now own their own homes, and related changes in consumption patterns form an important context to changes in the use of the garden. The rise in home ownership has been accompanied by marked population growth in less densely populated areas and increases in the proportion of homes with gardens (MINTEL 1999). Thus the percentage number of adults regularly participating in gardening activities rose from 42 per cent in 1977 to just under half (49 per cent) in 1996 (Office of National Statistics 1998). A 1999 consumer survey into gardening habits carried out by the commercial arm of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) claimed that just over half the adult population garden once a week and a third do some gardening every day (BBC 1999). Many of the adults who do not regularly participate in gardening will still be heavily involved in the use of the garden. For example, consumer data suggest that 67 per cent of the adult population identify gardening as a hobby, even if not a regular one (MINTEL 1999).

The rise in home ownership may be linked to the growth in gardening but other economic and social processes are as significant in understanding the role of the garden (Ravetz and Turkington 1995). Pressure on land and the virtually complete dominance over the last two decades of the private sector in new home construction are two of the key factors that have led to a decrease in average garden plot sizes. Thus, there is less space to grow vegetables or fruit and increasingly the lawn and flowers are dominant (MINTEL 1999). Only 20 per cent of garden owners grew vegetables in 1996 compared to 35 per cent ten years earlier (MINTEL 1999). Changing patterns of food consumption are one reason for the decline of fruit and vegetable cultivation, but Williams (1995) suggests that the changing use of the garden is also linked to adjustments in work patterns and household structures. The intensification of work and the rise of dual worker households means that the garden has slowly become the 'outdoor room', where children could play, families sit and relax. Today gardens are for some people at least becoming things to be looked at, used and enjoyed, rather than to be actually worked in, but as we have argued elsewhere 'work' in the garden can take many different forms (Bhatti and Church 2000). Nevertheless, an emphasis on visual experiences is clearly important in contemporary gardens as it is in other leisure activities (Rojek 1995). A recent

consumer survey found that 17 per cent of garden owners now have a statue to admire and 65 per cent admitted that they maintained their garden to 'keep up appearances' (BBC 1999). Madigan and Munro (1996) claim that increasingly home owning is a source of personal identity and status. This is in part responsible for the increasing use of the garden to display works of art and statues, especially though not exclusively, amongst higher income groups.

The complex array of economic and social processes that have affected home ownership, status and household characteristics are clearly important to understanding the nature of change in domestic gardens. Alongside these changes, the modernisation of the garden industry and the rise of the garden centre also have an important influence. The annual turnover of the garden centre industry is £3 billion and many small specialist nurseries have developed into expanded retail operations selling a range of home and leisure products alongside gardening items (MINTEL 1997). Garden centres with a third of market share are still the largest outlet for garden products, but ownership is fragmented and even the largest chains are small compared to other forms of retail operation in Britain. Their main competitors are the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) multiples that are mainly owned by large retail conglomerates and these outlets are catching up garden centres in terms of market share. There has also been major growth in the 1990s in garden products sold through grocery retailers seeking to expand their product range (MINTEL 1997). Lee (2000) has found that certain small operators in the nursery products sector rely on very different 'relational' product chains to those used by the DIY multiples. Nevertheless, the increasing presence of conglomerate capital in the garden industry has important consequences for domestic gardens. There is growing evidence that the idea of the low maintenance, or 'minimum', garden is taking over encouraged by the garden industry and changing leisure and consumption habits. Increasingly, the front garden is a hard standing for the car, and the back a private outdoor 'living room', lawned and part 'patioed' for ease of use and easy care. This shift from a cultivation-based gardening to home-based leisure use is accompanied by a desire to keep effort and time for maintenance to a minimum (MINTEL 1999). The introduction of new growing technologies and forms of production organisation have led to the growing containerisation of plants which allows consumers to purchase a wide range of ready to 'stick in the ground' plants, instant flowers and shrubs. This process has been further enhanced by garden centres having to increase sales volumes and reduce prices in the face of growing competition from DIY multiples and major grocery retailers.

A number of media commentators have argued that the mass production of containerised garden products is designed to meet the desire for instant visual gratification in the garden and has created environmentally harmful practices amongst producers and consumers (Evans 1999). Indeed, this form of garden use is usually maintained through industrialised forms of horticulture, with significant

doses of chemicals, and the destruction of the peat bogs. The media itself has an ambiguous relationship to these processes. Many printed and broadcast guides to gardening do suggest that a garden can be quickly bought in pieces from the garden centre and assembled according to expert advice from the media, books or popular magazines. The same guides, however, also often present gardening as a creative activity that involves respect for the environment. Either way, the very rapid surge in television garden programmes has been linked to people experimenting with new forms of gardening and MINTEL's (1999) survey found that 27 per cent of adults who garden regularly claim to take ideas from television. A range of social and economic relations may be establishing a dominant use of gardens in Britain based on an instant and easily managed domestic space. Whilst this may seem to promote a utilitarian approach to nature it does not preclude people feeling a more mixed and possibly ambiguous sense of connection with nature in their gardens. Indeed, the rise of gardening as a leisure activity could be interpreted as a way in for many people to learn about nature in their back yards, albeit a particular form of pre-packaged nature commodified by the garden industry.

Identifying the meanings associated with gardens is not readily achieved using secondary data sources. The BBC (1999) survey was linked to the large number of new gardening programmes on British television. Based on consumption habits and attitudes to gardens, a sample of respondents who had access to a garden were placed into seven categories; Image Focused (14 per cent), Gardening Lovers (15 per cent), Garden Proud Enjoyment Seekers (20 per cent), Duty Gardeners (15 per cent), Reluctant Novices (17 per cent) Casual (11 per cent), Rejecters (8 per cent). In a similar manner, the market research surveys by MINTEL (1999) divide Britain's adult garden owners into five consumer sub-groups. The two largest groups, each of which are claimed to include 35 per cent of the adult population with access to gardens, are Leisure Gardeners who enjoy leisure in the garden but lack time/skills to cultivate the garden and Investors who view the garden as adding financial value to their home. It is claimed that 23 per cent of adults are serious Horticultural Hobbyists who work hard in the garden and propagate plants from seeds and cuttings. The remaining 7 per cent attach little importance to their garden, suggesting that only in a small number of households is the garden an unused and unimportant space.

These different categorisations combined with the production strategies of garden centres might suggest that the garden for most people is not a site for experiencing nature. In the MINTEL groupings above only the Horticultural Hobbyists might be construed as seeking to understand nature. But using the MINTEL categories playfully it is quite possible to imagine a 'leisure gardener' in terms of garden use who is a 'serious gardener' in terms of their feelings about nature in the garden. The findings in the BBC (1999) consumer survey suggest a more explicit engagement with nature and 74 per cent of respondents agreed that they love

to care for things in the garden and watch them grow. Such figures perhaps indicate the problems of capturing complex feelings towards nature with simple quantitative measures. Macnaghton and Urry (1998) suggest official discourses of human–nature relations based on large-scale surveys often fail to capture the range of ways nature is sensed and experienced in any particular location. Researching, as Williams (1995) does, how the garden is used as a space and what people do in their garden is not the same as understanding how people engage with nature in the garden. The material aspects of human–nature relations are, as Eder (1996) has argued, based to some degree on more elusive symbolic and cognitive structures; for example, our attitudes towards the garden are often based on what it means within the context of family history, home-making and local community relations. Also Groening and Schneider (1999) note that gardens offer considerable potential for self-determined leisure. The next section uses new empirical data to examine the role and meaning of gardens in contemporary home-making and the implications for current conceptual discourses on the relationship between home, leisure and human–nature relations.

Order, sensing nature and social interaction in the garden

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in a two-stage process for collecting primary data on gardens and gardening. The first stage was a survey undertaken by the authors at garden centres. The results from this were used to inform a second stage of data collection by the Mass Observation Archive at Sussex University. In the first-stage garden centre survey 150 respondents were interviewed at three very different garden centres, one urban in London, one peri-urban in Ashford, Kent, and one rural in East Sussex. These face-to-face interviews lasting between 30 and 40 minutes used a mix of closed and open-ended questions to obtain information on the respondents' gardens and their views and practices relating to gardens. Respondents were then asked to take away and complete a secondary questionnaire, which contained open-ended questions on respondents' feelings and perceptions of their garden, home, and the environment. Seventy-seven of the original 150 respondents completed the secondary questionnaire, which provided a source of qualitative data with which to enhance the quantitative data obtained from the face-to-face garden centre interviews. The 150 respondents were evenly divided by gender but were concentrated in middle-income groups with 85 per cent being owner-occupiers. The majority of those who rented their property were council tenants. The household background of the 150 respondents was quite varied: 22 per cent were single adults, 9 per cent single parents, 42 per cent couples with children at home and 27 per cent couples without children at home. The 150 respondents were spread across the age range with 37 per cent under 40, 48 per cent aged 41–60 and the remainder 60 plus.

Results from the first stage of data collection were used to guide the second stage

of data collection undertaken by the Mass Observation Project (see Sheridan 1993). In 1998 Mass Observation issued a directive entitled 'The Garden and Gardening' that was sent to 354 people (252 women and 102 men). The response rate was high for a Mass Observation directive with 244 returns from 181 women and 63 men. The Directive asked respondents to write about key personal themes that related to their gardens. These ranged from growing up and childhood to how they learnt to garden, and garden use and gardening practices. We also asked who did what in the garden to see how specific tasks were related to gender and how these may be changing (see Bhatti and Church 2000). We were also interested in the role of the garden in 'home-making' and what significance it had in the creation of a domestic sphere and maintaining family life. Finally, we asked about the environment, and whether and how global environmental issues had penetrated into the everyday world of the home and garden. The replies range from a single page to some over 30 pages with photographs and drawings of gardens provided by respondents keen to tell the 'story' of their gardens. Dickens's (1996) warning about using Mass Observation data applies here. It is not a representative sample and tends to contain more women than men and relatively high proportions of older people. Respondents tend to be concentrated in the south of England but this is perhaps an advantage given the south-east England location of the surveys in the first stage of data collection. Nevertheless, Mass Observation (MO) does provide a rich source of qualitative material, which helps us to illustrate some of our themes. In this paper we mainly draw on the data generated by the Mass Observation Archive and use the results from our garden centre survey to supplement the analysis. An MO reference number accompanies the extracts quoted below that are obtained from the Mass Observation directive. The other quoted extracts are drawn from own survey in the first stage of the data collection.

The secondary data illustrated some of the broader processes that often prioritise a utilitarian meaning for domestic gardens. Both stages of primary data collection, however, illustrate how individuals develop an individual engagement with nature that reflects personalised practices, routines and memories. Often, however, respondents discussed their relationship with nature in pragmatic terms relating to the consequences for flora and fauna of their actions.

> **I don't use fertiliser or slug bait now as we can see the decline in the wild life. Gardens are refuges for wild creatures. The trees are less bushy than when I was young and there are fewer birds.**
>
> **[MO:A1292, Female, age 64]**

> **Chemicals are bad and TV adverts for fast growing weed killing is not good. We are exposed to too many chemicals – on our food, in our homes, in the atmosphere – and I don't see that polluting our gardens with them is at all beneficial.**
>
> **[MO:A2801, Female, age 32]**

These two extracts suggest a simplified, protective approach to nature, but the majority of respondents were aware of the more problematic paradoxes of controlling and respecting nature and the complex interplay between the garden, leisure, home-making and nature.

In the supplementary section of the garden centre survey, one man offered his formal view of the ambiguities and interactions of home-making, family, spatial order, leisure and nature in the garden.

> My idea of a garden is a place that looks reasonably attractive, is reasonably well looked after, a reasonable show of colour throughout the year. Lawns cut as is practical. Weeding the same, a safe and practical place for my 2 year old son to play and run around and enjoy his slide and toy car. We enjoy sitting out on the patio when the weather conditions permit and enjoy the colourful and varied plants around us and like to see the variety of visiting insects and occasional animals, hedgehogs and frogs. The cat enjoys hiding and playing in the shrubs and bushes so I hope I've found the right balance for all of us and nature.
>
> [Male, age 40]

A concern for balance was repeated in a number of responses. Nature could be 'felt' in the garden but this engagement was mediated by other leisure uses and other social issues that construct the meaning of the garden, such as the concern for safety mentioned in the extract above. The extracts presented so far may simply confirm the claims of Macnaghton and Urry (1998) regarding the role of everyday practices in the construction of human–nature relations typified by ambiguity. To some degree the garden industry and the media will both enhance such feelings by promoting containerisation but also extending knowledge relating to environmental possibilities. Within a situation of ambiguity, however, people still connect with and 'read' natures and certain social norms will emerge. Other extracts indicate how our respondents, through practices, engage with the ambiguity of nature in their gardens and highlight a complex interplay affecting the experience of nature between the desire for privacy and the importance of real and imagined social interaction with friends and family.

Respondents described their highly personalised and sensory readings of nature in their gardens. The extract below typified the sensing of plants, animals and the landscape that imbued visual practices and experiences in the garden:

> A place to watch the bats, comets, eclipses, to watch from 3am–7am the tree, in the winter, change from black sky and black tree trunks slowly through every colour of blue to daylight, it is wonderful. To be on a main road and not know it in the back garden – peace and naturalness.
>
> [Female, age 42]

For many respondents, however, experiencing nature in the garden was more than just a process that involved the physical senses. The 'sensing of nature' was usually mediated by a number of relational processes, particularly the real and imagined interaction with other individuals. The stories and extracts below indicate

the role of friends, children and other relatives in the development of practices and meanings involving nature in the garden.

> We planted lilacs, a purple one on the left-hand corner for my sister and a white one in the right-hand corner for me. We were told they were ours and we must look after them, but I don't remember doing very much for them or even being aware that we must look after them. Years later I met the women who moved into our house, the white lilac was still doing well and very visible above the wall ... My mother was the gardener, but she was full of can't and don't and that won't work. I don't think she was adventurous about the garden. I remember helping to weed, though how I could do that I've no idea for she never told me what anything was. We never got to do any of the fun stuff like planting or putting seeds or deadheading or what ever ... One year when the lawn mower was in pieces for several weeks, it pleased my father to issue us all with scissors – some of us with nail scissors – and we (five children and my mother) were all sent out to cut the grass with these implements. The result had best not be imagined. Of course I didn't know at the time that my father's illness, the one that was never defined or mentioned in front of him, or in front of strangers, was in fact a mental illness and that he was crazy as a coot.
>
> [MO:M1201 female, age 35]

Other respondents did not write such distinctive stories but a number indicated the complex interactions between current practices in the garden and memories of childhood. The writings often were suggestive of feelings that went well beyond a simple nostalgia. The woman below was seeking to explain some of her current anxieties about her garden by reflecting on her parents' garden.

> I wanted a pet (as a child) but was not allowed to have one, so at one point I had a pet moss, just a piece of moss my friend had given me, stolen from someone else's garden. I kept it in a flower pot for a while but unfortunately it died ... this same friend claimed to have a pet beaver in her garden, but when she showed it to me it was only a piece of rolled up paper in an old baking tray. I thought I would have one of those. At one point my father thought I should be introduced to gardening, and helped me to make a rockery at the end of a flower bed that he did not use much. It was alright for a while but then I lost interest. I also liked burying any dead birds I found and making graves for them ... My father did all the gardening so the garden was really his territory. Sometimes he explained a few things about it so I knew the names of the plants ... My mother took over when he died, though she did not manage very well. It seemed to worry her, and she did not enjoy it in the way my father did.
>
> [MO: A2212 female, age 41]

Remembered childhood and nature combined for some respondents to attach a particular meaning to certain plants, which unlike gardens are transferable from home to home. Often these plants and the spaces associated with them were attributed a particular significance in expressing meanings attached to the garden. This is similar to Putnam's (1993) observations concerning the importance attached to key possessions and parts of rooms within the home. Indeed, for some respondents, relationships with nature and other people are blurred and intertwined in the areas of the garden containing these particular plants.

> I also had a small piece of ground where I was encouraged to plant flower seeds. I do have a plant that brings back memories of my childhood, it was a Pink Moss Rose around the brick toilet at the bottom of my grandmother's garden, and I have planted the same rose trees in each of the gardens I have owned.
>
> [MO:A1646 female, age 66]

> Ivy always has special memories – Ivy was my grandma's name . She died recently and I know that I will always remember her when I see 'ivy'.
>
> [MO:A1292 female, age 64]

> I call one long garden bed my friendship garden because most of what's growing in it comes from cuttings/plants people have given me. I always find the gift of a plant and/or cutting exciting and pleasing.
>
> [MO:A1996 female, age 55]

These extracts suggest that past and present social interactions are important in the construction of the garden not just as a leisure space but also as a site for understanding and sensing nature. These findings which stress social interaction must be set alongside the practices individuals used to create a spatial ordering in their gardens linked to a desire for privacy. Of course, privacy and social interaction are not mutually exclusive since often a 'private' space will be constructed to allow interaction with selected family and friends. Nevertheless, privacy in the garden was important to many respondents and was developed in quite subtle ways.

> If the weather is up to it, then it [the back garden] is an additional room for me – I eat and work on the bench: read and lay around on the seat. My garden is my retreat. The front garden, like the rest of the street is lawned and open plan … it is very plain. This is intentional … I do not want the front to provide any expectations of what the back is like. The public and private image kept separate!
>
> [MO: A2464 male, age 38]

The garden, like other spaces in the home oriented to privacy must also adjust to the process of socialisation. Allan and Crow (1991) argue that home-making involves complex relations and tensions between the desires for privacy and social interaction. As the next extract suggests, the garden combines in quite simple ways personal, private leisure with group interaction involving family and friends:

> We enjoy our garden. A nephew comes down from Yorkshire and he digs the garden, cuts hedges, I then make holes in the soil, and my wife puts in the plants. So we both enjoy our garden. In the summer we sit out on the lawn and enjoy ourselves. We also have a lot of visitors and value their comments.
>
> [Male, age 62]

The final extract of this section was one of a number of examples where respondents emphasised the garden as a source of status amongst neighbours and visitors. Concerns relating to status, however, were less prevalent than those stressing privacy and, not unexpectedly, some of the detailed responses on the issue of privacy were imbued with the tensions of social interaction between neighbours.

> **I hate it open as our neighbours on both sides allow their weeds and dandelions and other ground-bugging weeds to grow flowers and seed, so it is an endless battle to keep our beds free [of weeds]. Our awful neighbour doesn't know the difference between a common weed and a flower and resents being advised and criticised. I put up a 7′ fence to keep our back garden weed free … Our garden is basically a flower garden with some paving to sit on. I want quiet so that you can hear birdsong and bees in our garden. The trials of modern living and inconsiderate selfish neighbours I find most irritating.**
>
> **[MO:A883, male clerk, age 63]**

This extract whilst seemingly an expression of a determined desire for privacy also shows a sensitivity for nature. Privacy is desired to allow the senses to experience nature. Collectively, our empirical data suggest that for some respondents gardens are places where individuals feel a very strong connection to nature despite a sense of ambiguity and compromise. Thus, gardens are specific times and spaces that for significant numbers of people can play an important everyday role in structuring popular meanings and practices associated with human–nature relations. Macnaghton and Urry (1998:236) use their empirical data on attitudes to non-domestic environments to suggest that 'our senses cannot be trusted to interpret the dwelt-in world'. We suggest, perhaps more optimistically, that this may not be the case for all spaces and times in the 'dwelt-in' world and the garden for some of our respondents is a space to sense and interpret nature. Many of the respondents in both our data sources showed acute awareness of the dichotomies associated with human–nature relations in gardens. Nevertheless, by trusting not so much in their senses but in the interactions between their senses, their memories, and their family and friends, some respondents were able to develop a personalised, often eco-sensitive, interpretation of nature in the garden. Again, however, the ambiguity of human–nature relations means that the significance of personal experiences of nature have to be assessed in a qualified manner since, like home-making, practices in gardens are often private and escapist, resulting in an ordering of nature in the pursuit of identity, status and leisure.

Conclusion: exploring secrets of the garden

We have only captured a small part of the world of domestic gardens, but their connection with wider debates about human–nature relations should now be apparent. Uses, meanings and practices in gardens are structured by broad processes associated with production and consumption in the garden industry and the social and economic relations of changing housing patterns. These processes contribute mainly to consumerist and utilitarian orderings of nature in domestic gardens, but media discussions simply emphasising instant gratification and off-the-shelf gardens are far too narrow. Human agency and spatiality in the garden interacts in a complex manner with these changing wider forces. Purdue (1997) has noted how

people use their own knowledge of local conditions and commercially-produced seeds to create their own 'backyard diversity'. Gardens may be imbued with meanings associated with spatial order, leisure and status, but our empirical analysis indicates the garden is also a space where individuals can develop complex, sensual and personalised readings of nature. Thus, the garden emerges as a domestic space that is not only linked to the concerns of home-making but also has a distinctive, yet ambiguous, ecological role. This has implications for the discussion of the home's role in the search for ecological certainty (Hinchcliffe 1997). The domestic garden provides opportunities and possibilities in relation to nature that may not exist elsewhere either in the rest of the home or in public spaces. In this context the garden is a place in which – on a personal level – to engage, confront and understand the changing natural world. Furthermore, our analysis of contemporary gardens has stressed their role in relation to the production and consumption priorities of late modern capitalism, as well as highlighting the range of socio-ecological possibilities present in these everyday domestic spaces.

Significantly for the understanding of human–nature relations, the empirical analysis in this paper suggests that connections between agency and nature in gardens were structured to a significant degree by complex relational processes and social interactions. Considerable emphasis has been placed on the role of 'new sociations' in the construction of environmental knowledge and understanding (Dickens 1992; Macnaghton and Urry 1995). Our empirical results suggest that more traditional sociations are still very important for understanding changing environmental identities. In the case of gardens, family and friendship relations, real and remembered, can be important dimensions of human agency in everyday life that structure relations with nature. This indicates certain possibilities for shaping less eco-hostile relations with nature that extend well beyond the home garden. Acknowledging the way in which often very personalised human relationships imbue and mediate human–nature relations may be an important component in achieving the re-enchantment with nature that Smith (1998) claims is essential for challenging dominant institutional ideologies.

These are strong claims to be made on the basis of an analysis of gardens, but gardens are not marginal spaces; they are commonplace and as such provide social scientists with a rich source of social interactions, encounters, meanings and cultural exchanges. One negative interpretation of current changes in gardens could be that the activities of the garden industry and the media are, in true Focauldian style, merely seeking to expand hegemonic power structures into yet another micro social world. For the moment at least, this seems overly pessimistic due to the possibilities associated with gardens. By combining geographical and sociological perspectives we have shown that gardens are experienced as a private retreat; a haven from the public world; a setting for creativity; a social place for sharing; a connection to personal history; a reflection of one's identity; a status symbol; and as a natural world

rendered more comprehensible. Gardens and gardening have been neglected areas in social science, despite the relentlessly increasing media coverage, and there is clearly more research to be done into these spaces, which may provide important and distinct insights into contemporary human–nature relations.

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